

WIGMORE HALL

Thursday 27 March 2025
7.30pm

Nelson Goerner piano

Maurice Ravel (1875-1937)

Pavane pour une infante défunte (1899)

Valses nobles et sentimentales (1911)

*Modéré, très franc • Assez lent, avec une expression intense •
Modéré • Assez animé • Presque lent, dans un sentiment intime
• Vif • Moins vif • Epilogue. Lent*

Claude Debussy (1862-1918)

Images, Series 1 (1901-5)

I. Reflets dans l'eau • II. Hommage à Rameau • III. Mouvement

L'isle joyeuse (1903-4)

Interval

Franz Liszt (1811-1886)

Ballade No. 2 S171 (1853)

La leggerezza from 3 *Etudes de concert* S144 (ca. 1848)

Valse oubliée No. 2 S215/2 (1883)

Hungarian Rhapsody No. 6 in D flat S244 (1847)



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The imagination of **Maurice Ravel** was frequently sparked by the image of couples dancing in a ballroom, perhaps in a bygone era when balls were more glamorous and dances more elegant. Many of his best-known works were composed for dancers, have subsequently been turned into ballets (like the pieces heard tonight), or were inspired by specific dance forms. *Pavane pour une infante défunte* was composed in 1899, while Ravel was studying at the Paris Conservatoire under Fauré, whose own Pavane perhaps inspired Ravel to use the stately dance as his model. No actual Spanish princess was responsible for its title, as Ravel explained: 'Do not attach any importance to the title. I chose it only for its euphonious qualities ... It is not a funeral lament for a dead child, but rather an evocation of the pavane which could have been danced by such a little princess as painted by Velázquez.'

Valses nobles et sentimentales was first performed in 1911 at a concert whose promoters presented the music anonymously, generating publicity by inviting audiences to guess composers' identities. So different in style were the Valses from Ravel's previous piano work, the virtuosic *Gaspard de la nuit*, that few identified him correctly: Kodály and Satie were among the suggestions submitted. Ravel's title indicates a desire to emulate Schubert, while the epigraph from Henri de Régnier with which he prefaced the score ('the delicious and forever-new pleasure of a useless occupation') suggests its hedonistic aesthetic.

Dance was an important inspiration for **Debussy**, too, as the energetic central section of *L'isle joyeuse* and the *moto perpetuo* of the third of the *Images, Series 1* show, but a still more significant influence came from painting and from visual impressions more generally. The *Images* performed tonight were published in 1905, the first of three collections to which Debussy gave that title: a second set of piano *Images* followed in 1907, and three large-scale orchestral pieces between 1905 and 1912. Debussy's fondness for the title suggests his belief in music's power to represent precise visual phenomena, even if he resisted being labelled an 'Impressionist', a musical equivalent of Monet and Renoir, painters 20 years his senior.

As the title 'Reflets dans l'eau' suggests, the first *Image* depicts water: a favourite theme for Debussy, and one that he was concurrently painting on a much larger canvas in the orchestral *La mer*, whose principal key of D flat major 'Reflets' shares. In 'Hommage à Rameau', the principal stimulus is musical: Debussy's lifelong admiration for his French baroque predecessor had recently been renewed by the Paris Opéra's revival of *Castor et Pollux*, with music Debussy described as 'so personal in tone, so new in construction, that space and time are defeated and Rameau seems to be [our] contemporary'. There is no hint of pastiche in Debussy's 'Hommage', though it does take the form of a sarabande, a slow triple-time dance form popular in the Baroque era. The graveness of this central panel of

Debussy's triptych is dispelled by the brilliance of the energetic 'Mouvement'.

For *L'isle joyeuse*, composed in 1904, Debussy revealed the importance of a specific artistic inspiration when he explained to Ricardo Viñes, who was preparing to give the première, that there's a bit of *L'embarquement pour Cythère*, though 'with less melancholy'. Watteau's famous painting, now in the Louvre, depicts couples surrounded by cupids enjoying a celebration on the Greek island, traditionally regarded as the birthplace of Venus. Many of the inhabitants seem to be departing, suggesting their pleasures may be short-lived; this is not evident in Debussy's brilliant showpiece, which proceeds without a hint of hesitation to its bravura conclusion.

The first two **Liszt** pieces heard tonight date from his period as Kapellmeister in Weimar, a post he finally accepted in 1848, six years after it was offered. Even though he was frequently occupied with conducting demanding new operas, not least those of his friend Richard Wagner, his 13 years in Weimar were the most productive of his life. Liszt composed the 'Second Ballade' in 1853, shortly after the B minor Piano Sonata, whose key it shares. The *Ballade* was probably inspired by Gottfried Bürger's well-known ballad, *Lenore*, which tells of a young girl abducted by a mysterious figure – initially mistaken for her soldier fiancé, ultimately revealed as Death. The story's rapid reversals of fortune are paralleled by the dramatic shifts of mood in Liszt's piece, but the skill and subtlety with which he transforms each motive into the next – a technique honed in the Sonata – ensures coherence.

'La leggerezza' – the title, though apt, may not be Liszt's own – is the second of three *Concert Etudes* published in 1849, the same year in which Liszt helped Wagner escape potential imprisonment for his role in the failed Dresden Uprising. The freedom with which its theme is developed suggests what the piano improvisations for which Liszt was famous might have sounded like. The 'Valses oubliées', meanwhile, are among Liszt's final works, composed in 1883, the year in which Wagner, by now his son-in-law, died. As in Ravel's music, the waltz form is used to evoke nostalgia: No. 2 quotes Liszt's own *Valse de bravoure*, one of the showpieces with which he had established himself as Europe's greatest piano virtuoso almost 40 years earlier.

The Sixth Hungarian Rhapsody – one of 15 such works that Liszt published in 1853; four more followed at the end of his life – is one of his most popular pieces, both in its original and orchestrated versions; one of its melodies acquired new fame when Jacques Brel adapted it as *Ne me quitte pas*. Liszt's dazzling re-imagining of the songs and dances he transcribed produced a vogue for Hungarian folk music across fashionable Europe.

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